# Horace Tapscott


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It's the summer of 2005 and I'm in Los Angeles to report for *Straight No Chaser* magazine on the intergenerational jazz and hip hop community connected by **Carlos Niño**, bandleader of **Build An Ark**.

On my first day I am picked up by Carlos and driven across the city to some of his regular digging spots. Our first stop is Amoeba Records, where I ask the deep collector to suggest some essential LA jazz. With a glint in his eye he pulls out a stack of albums and says, "You need these". The LPs turned out to be **Horace Tapscott** and his **Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra** recordings made for **Tom Albach**'s Nimbus label in the early 1980s. The faded $5 stickers peeling off the corners of the sleeves spoke volumes of how little was known about Tapscott outside of the LA jazz community at that time.

A year later, **Steve Isoardi**'s book *The Dark Tree; Jazz and the Community Arts In Los Angeles* documented the role this under-recognised pianist, bandleader, teacher, mentor and activist played in his community since the early 1960s. Musician Vijay Iyer captured the importance of the book when he wrote: "Far more than a historical 'overdub' of an undocumented scene, this book disrupts the mythic notions of jazz history."

But I am in Los Angeles a year before the book is out and I know very little about Horace Tapscott, apart from he was an important enough figure for LA singer **Dwight Trible** to name his first Carlos Niño produced LP simply *Horace*. Later that day, armed with a stack of Nimbus LPs, I am in the home of long time Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra poet **Kamau Daáood** on the edge of Leimert Park, surrounded by African artefacts and piles of books. I begin by asking him about Horace, who sadly passed away in 1999. He hands me a book of his own poems called *The Language of Saxophones* and opens the page on *Papa, The Lean Griot* – dedicated to the "pianist, arranger, composer, mentor, community arts activist, beloved patriarch". The lines of the poem dance off the page:

*I am Horace Tapscott*
*my fingers are dancing grass roots*
*I do not fit into form, I create form*
*my ears are radar charting the whispers of my ancestors*
*I seek the divinity in outcast, the richness in rebels*
*I will pray for you on this snaggle-toothed piano*
*Songs for the unsung*
*Whose lineage was fed to sharks in the Atlantic*
*I will conceptualise you into trance, here in the garage*
*Conjure spirits that will sing young into remembrance*
*On this piano so out of tune it opens doors to other worlds*
*I will climb inside this piano searching for our history*
*I will assemble a choir of unborn voices*
*to teach what the future sounds like…*
*I am Horace Tapscott*
*and I am not for sale*

These words whirl around my mind as I sit in 5th Street Dick's, the Leimert Park café that became a cross-generational creative sanctuary following the Los Angeles uprising of 1992. There, late into the night, elders regale me with stories of Horace and why he was so important to the community. I learn how over forty years and amid two major social uprisings, the musical and social guidance of Horace bonded the generations as an artistic village was built within the socially divided sprawl Los Angeles. The next day I am in the home of singer Dwight Trible who joined the Arkestra in the late 1980s and has remained their Vocal Director ever since. "I think that Horace made everyone believe that it was possible to make this kind of music," he tells me. "He invited everyone into his Arkestra and opened up the doors to all of us."

Some fifteen years later those Nimbus Records I picked up for $5 are going for over $300 if you are lucky enough to find them. Thanks to a series of re-issues of the Nimbus recordings on the Outernational Sounds label and live sessions of the Arkestra towards the end of Horace's life released on Dark Tree records, the music of Horace Tapscott is finally getting the recognition it deserves. But the legacy of Horace is not just in the music he left behind, but also in what he passed down for others to take forward. More than 20 years after his passing, the Arkestra Horace formed continues to evolve through a new inter-generational collective. With the LA-based label The Village capturing this latest chapter in a story that spans more than five decades, it's time to re-evaluate the legacy of this modern day urban griot.

Horace Tapscott was born and raised in Houston, Texas, where he lived with his mother who had her own quartet playing across the chitlin' circuit. "From day one it was music. All I remember when I came into being, all I saw around me was music," he recalled in his autobiography *Songs of the Unsung*, published in 2001. His first instrument was the trombone, but he would also play on an old upright piano, watched closely by his mother. "What she laid on me was discipline, getting to it and working at it, and listening and learning from what she was doing," he recalled in *Songs of the Unsung*. This would be an important foundation for the future mentor and bandleader. But in 1943, when the family moved to Los Angeles for his stepfather to work at the shipyards, all Horace had on his mind was playing that horn.

This was the golden age of Central Avenue where the sharpest dressed cats could be found at the Dunbar Hotel and at happening jazz clubs like The Downbeat and Club Alabam. It was a scene where Horace and his future wife **Cecilia**, whom he met when he was 14, became immersed, catching names like **Art Tatum**, **Red Callender**, and **Bill Douglass**. Another key hangout was the headquarters of the all black musicians union by the name of 767. It was a gathering place for generations of musicians who would listen and learn from their elders. Horace was introduced to the union by his trombone teacher and he would spend days sitting on the stoop watching and learning or joining in at rehearsals. "Every black musician in the world would pass by there, slap you upside the head, and say something smart to you," Horace recounted in *The Dark Tree*. "Me, **Eric Dolphy**, **Don Cherry**, **Frank Morgan**, we were sitting there all the time, during all those years. It was just rich, very rich."

One day on the way back from rehearsals, Horace

met his first real mentor, **Gerald Wilson**, who developed his harmonic innovations for the big band at 767. "Gerald was the first guy that got me into arranging and composing for a big orchestra," Horace recalled in his autobiography. **Duke Ellington**, **Count Basie**, **Fletcher Henderson** and **Lionel Hampton**, were just some of the other big names whose rehearsals Horace would sit in on.

After graduating from Jefferson High School in 1952, Horace started at Los Angeles City College, where he joined the band, but it was around Central Avenue where he got his real education. With other young players like **Billy Higgins** and Don Cherry, Horace would be invited into sessions at spots like The Downbeat. It was on Central Avenue that Horace started to appreciate the importance of togetherness and the role of culture in social advancement. "Central Avenue brought a lot of people together musically and artistically," he recalled in *Songs of the Unsung*. "To me it was colourful and it was educational. It was an experience that I can't forget, because it raised me." These creative interactions opened up a whole world of collaboration and cooperation to the inquisitive young musician. He would use these experiences as the foundation for his own jazz collective.

After a stint in the Air Force in the mid–1950s, Horace returned to Los Angeles where he was called up by Lionel Hampton for a tour of New York. While he had earned his spurs as a trombonist on Central Avenue, Horace had never stopped playing the piano. Inspired by the rule breaking of **Art Tatum**, the dexterity of **Erroll Garner**, and the orchestral playing of Duke Ellington, Horace began to create his own sound on the instrument. "I was trying to use the piano in different ways, trying for different sounds by using the pedals to expand and color the music, getting the tone rising up and down," he recalled in *Songs of the Unsung*. "I was also playing the piano strings like a harp and even tapping the wood."

Tired of playing across the racist South, after a gig in Los Angeles Horace decided to leave Hampton's band. Returning to Los Angeles, Horace found a jazz community lost and disjointed since the scene around Central Avenue had faded away. "I felt that having the Arkestra – which had a message to give, playing original music, dancers and poetry – would give us an opportunity to open up all areas in our culture that had been stopped," Horace wrote in *Songs of the Unsung*. "That's how the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra – the Ark – began, with the knowledge that we wanted to preserve the black arts in the community."

With the maxim of "Our music is contributive rather than competitive", The Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (also known as the Underground Musicians Association or UGMA later renamed the UGMAA Union of God's Musicians and Artist's Ascension) was formed in 1961. Alongside his old friend trombonist **Lester Robertson**, and players like bassists **Alan Hines** and **David Bryant** and saxophonist **Jimmy Woods**, the Arkestra's first members included **Linda Hill** who would become a central figure in the early story of the Arkestra.

Horace had met Linda when she nursed him at General Hospital when he was suffering from kidney stones. She had never studied music but under Horace's guidance, like so many Arkestra members, she found her creative spirit as a pianist and vocalist. Just as important for the growth of the Ark and its family orientated organisation was her role as what Horace called "the Ark's matriarch" who provided the group's first home.

Later celebrated by Horace in one of the Ark's standards, Lino's Pad was the name given for her small house on 75th Street between Central Avenue and Hooper. It was here that the Arkestra, which now included heavyweights like drummer **Leroy Brooks** and saxophonist **Arthur Blythe**, rehearsed and where Horace passed down his knowledge of composition to band members while their families were looked after by Linda. In *The Dark Tree*, another sister, trumpeter **Danyel Romero**, recalled the deep contribution Hill made to the Ark: "Linda was like a big flower... She was connected to the spirits or sources of the unseen world that most of us were not dealing with."

As the Arkestra grew, Tapscott looked beyond big name players for its membership. "Every person I brought in was an outsider, so to speak. They leaned a little bit," he recalled in the autobiography. One of those was a young conguero named **Taumbu (Hal Ector)**, who rode with the Ark throughout the 1960s. "I was living in Venice Beach when I was invited to the UGMA house," Taumbu recalls. "It was [a place] for real resistance artists. At the time, I was a fugitive of the L.A. police. Also, I was homeless... It was about Blackness and Black music without compromise."

Soon more and more of the outsider musicians and people who didn't even know they could play until they met Horace, arrived at Lino's Pad. Through the sixties Arkestra members included saxophonist Arthur Blythe, bassist David Bryant, drummer **Everett Brown Jr**, along with an ever expanding roster of young up–and–coming players.

With South Central LA blighted by years of neglect and direct racial attacks by the so–called "proactive policing" of Chief **William H. Parker**'s LAPD, the Arkestra provided support to the community that went beyond music.

Whether loading instruments onto flatbed trucks to play on street corners, holding sessions at old folks' homes, hospitals, and prisons, or teaching music and poetry in elementary schools, the Ark took the music to the people.

The Arkestra and UGMA anticipated the later work of better–known jazz collectives like the St. Louis–based Black Artists Group (BAG) and Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). "You had all these different movements coming together of artists with like minds in both the music, social consciousness and sense of responsibility to the community," says Kamau Daáood. "But it's a very ancient notion to have artists serious about what their art can do for people and environments. Knowing that it can be glue and it can be medicine, it can inspire and uplift."

Horace's Ark also mirrored to some extent the collective energy of **Sun Ra**'s better–known Arkestra. "Of course I was aware of Sun Ra's Arkestra, always respected what he was doing, and got my spelling of that word from him, but that was as far as the hookup went," Tapscott told Steve Isoardi. "While he

was thinking in terms of space, of an ark travelling through space, I was thinking in terms of a cultural safe house for the music."

Like Linda Hill, Black Panther activist and close friend of the bandleader **Elaine Brown**, found in Horace (known affectionately as Papa) a man who was at home in female company. "He was the most non-egocentric man you could imagine and a real friend to us as women," she says fondly. "He didn't have that macho thing but was very protective and was a man in every sense of the word." After meeting Horace following a breakdown extenuated by wrongly prescribed drugs, she soon experienced the protective arm of the bandleader. "Watts, at that time, was a dangerous place with a whole lot of people with a lot of rage and carrying guns. I was so out of it, I needed to be taken care of, and that became a big part of our relationship," she says.

By the mid 1960s, the UGMA organisation had evolved to encompass acting, dance reading and writing classes for children. Through the tutorship of Linda Hill's music classes many of these children went on to become Arkestra members in the coming years. As well as its commitment to its immediate family the Arkestra was there to defend the whole community. "It was a revolutionary period, and all the cats and chicks were revolutionaries in the true sense of the word," Taumbu explains.

The tensions that had been escalating reached boiling point in the hot summer of 1965. On August 11, a 21-year old black man named **Marquette Frye** was driving his brother home when they were pulled over by police. When his mother arrived, a crowd of 300 onlookers had gathered and soon rumours of police brutality spread across the neighbourhood. Whatever the truth, the powder keg had been lit. The next five days saw 34 people killed and over $40 million worth of destruction in the community.

The response was to get organised. "It was a moment of time where all the forces lined up for the oppressed, so we had no choice but to find each other," says Elaine Brown. "There was a tidal wave and you could either get in it and swim, or not, because everyone was caught up in something if you were in Los Angeles at that time."

In an interview with writer and photographer Bob Rosenbaum, Horace explained how "the [Arkestra] just happened to be hooked up with the revolutionaries, that's just the way it was. There was **Stokely Carmichael**, **H. Rap Brown**, the cats, they'd come around and sit around while we'd rehearse and talk about the music."

Much of the Arkestra's activity centred around The Watts Happening Coffee House, an old furniture store on 103rd Street that had become a cultural centre with concerts and poetry readings. Following the uprisings, the Arkestra were closely monitored and harassed by the authorities including an armed raid on the Coffee House by the police. "Any kind of Black militancy or Black consciousness or anything that disturbed the status quo was being crushed. So Horace was certainly swept into the whole thing that the FBI was trying to destroy," says Elaine Brown.

The insurrection changed Horace and the direction of the Ark. "It had really gotten to me," he recalled in *Songs of the Unsung*. "All around me there were wild brothers who just wanted to die, to go downtown and kill everyone... People were pissed off and were gathering together to throw firebombs. It really was out. So we said that we'd best do it the best way we know, and that was through the Ark."

By the end of 1965, The Coffee House had also become the new home of The Watts Writer's Workshop, the brainchild of screenwriter Budd Schulberg who wanted to create a place where "hopelessness might rise a Black phoenix" following the uprisings. Acclaimed writers to emerge from the Workshop included **Quincy Troupe**, **Eric Priestley**, **Ojenke**, one of the first poets to join the UGMA, as well as a young Kamau Daáood.

Kamau Daaood's first experience of working with Horace came at another important venue for the collective. "They used to have regular festivals on **Malcolm X**'s birthday at a place called South Park," he says. "Horace had heard my poetry, so he asked me to come onstage and read before this fourteen-piece orchestra with the horns playing **John Coltrane**'s 'Equinox'... To play in that Ark was like having the angels and the ancestors behind you. It was like being home, and you were in a place where you were supported and loved."

Kamau describes the importance of being taken under the wing of Horace as the Arkestra became even stronger in the years following. "Well firstly he was like a big brother figure and sometimes a father figure. But then he was also a mentor and someone to guide me conceptually in terms of how to put this thing in my head in the right place as to what I am involved in. The whole collective nature of doing this. The We rather than the I."

The first recorded document of Horace was in direct response to the political climate of the late sixties. As well as being a party activist Elaine Brown was an aspiring singer whom Horace had helped nurture. Released in 1969 and featuring vocals by Brown and music by Horace and the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, *Seize The Time* followed the assassination of Party members **John Huggins** and **Bunchy Carter** at UCLA. "I sang at the funeral of Bunchy Carter, and the head of the party, **David Hilliard**, came down and said he wanted to hear my songs," Brown recalls. "So we went off and got a piano, and he liked one of them in particular ['The Meeting'] and said, 'That's gonna be the Black Panther Party national anthem.' So next thing I knew, he was saying I had to make an album."

The Ark's fierce reputation and Horace's unwillingness to compromise meant that during the late sixties they only recorded one album. Released in 1969, The Horace Tapscott Quintet's *The Giant Is Awakened*, was one of the first LPs on **Bob Thiele**'s Flying Dutchman label. In a band featuring late sixties Arkestra regulars saxophonist Black Arthur Blythe, bassist David Bryant and drummer Everett Brown Jr, the album consisted of compositions they had been performing since the early 1960s. This included the soaring spiritual jazz of the title track and "The Dark Tree" that had become the group's anthem. Despite the album sounding like a statement of intent by Bob Thiele, who had just emerged from eight years at the helm of Impulse!, it would be Horace's only LP


HORACE TAPSCOTT SEXTET

for the label. After being left out of the final mixing process, Horace was left with even more mistrust of the industry. Subsequently, unlike other collectives like Strata–East in New York and Tribe in Detroit, the Arkestra's self–reliance did not expand to a label and it would be more than a decade before the Arkestra released another record.

Despite long time members such as Arthur Blythe and Butch Morris leaving, the mid–1970s saw the Ark reborn under the leadership of a heavy multi–reed player by the name of **Jesse Sharps** who took full control after his co–leader saxophonist **Fuasi Abdul–Khaliq** left in 1977. Sharps had been with the Arkestra since the late 1960s after first witnessing them outside The Coffee House. "I just knew that was the thing to do. You hear it for the first time, That's it, I gotta do that," he explained in *The Dark Tree*. For Ark members, Sharps was a natural successor to Tapscott as bandleader. "Jesse's been with Horace since he was 12 years old. He was groomed for that purpose. It was perfect," Ark flautist **Kafi Roberts** told Steve Isoardi. "Horace is our teacher and mentor and all of that, but he really, really respected Jesse. And he gave him all the leverage that he needed to make the band work the way he thought."

Other long–standing members, such as bassist **Roberto Miranda**, pianist **Nate Morgan**, and alto saxophonist and future bandleader **Michael Session**, brought a new energy to the Arkestra. Musicians were drawn to the Arkestra both for its creative and political stance. "I was a revolutionist. I was into Black power... The Ark had that kind of revolutionary motif to it. It definitely depicted the struggle through music. The vibe of what was going on with it. The Ark is the Black struggle," Michael Session explained in *The Dark Tree*. Steered by Sharps and with the energy of these younger players, this was one of the Arkestra's most creative periods. "We started expanding," Jesse Sharps recalled in *The Dark Tree*. "Then we started doing more modern things, because the writing started to change and you got new writers." Despite this being one the most disciplined and creative of all the incarnations of the Ark, there was still no label releasing this incredible music.

After years of inattention by the industry, Horace and Arkestra members eventually got the platform they deserved thanks to a jazz fan from Santa Barbara by the name of Tom Albach. Born in Kansas, Albach had moved to LA at the height of the Central Avenue scene. He had often heard talk of the Arkestra in the jazz clubs around LA but only saw them live in 1977 at a concert at the Century City Playhouse. After the show Albach approached Horace backstage and the two exchanged numbers. In the following weeks calls were made resulting in Albach buying some tapes from Horace's archive. Back home on a drive through the coastal range of mountains around Santa Barbara he played the cassettes for the first time. "It dawned on me that I was listening to the work of a major American musical figure. I said 'Jesus Christ, something should be done about this'," Albach, who sadly passed away in 2020, recalled to Steve Isoardi.

Going by the name Nimbus (later renamed Nimbus West after objections from a British label with the same name) his imprint was set up with the sole purpose of releasing the Arkestra's music. "The more I was involved in his presence, the more I realised what a thinker he was. And also the way he dealt with people was just something to tell me that I shouldn't say anything to him at all about the music. Whatever he wants to record, it's fine with me," Albach continued.

The complete creative freedom Albach gave the Arkestra and his openness with members persuaded Horace that here was a man he could trust. "When he came down into the ghetto, he came down there and said what he had to say, and he got the respect of the cats," Tapscott told Steve Isoardi. "So he's got a niche in the Arkestra that no one white has ever had. He came and told his story, and he took care of a lot of the cats. He helped some cats get back on their feet, that kind of thing. And all those guys never forgot that."

If it hadn't been for Tom Albach we might never have heard on record the unbridled energy of one of jazz music's great collectives. Recorded at Sage and Sound Studios in Hollywood, the first two Arkestra recordings on Nimbus in 1978 *Flight 17* and *The Call* were powerful ensemble works that captured the soaring energy of the Arkestra's live performances. The collaborative spirit that Horace encouraged was enhanced through the delegation of writing duties to members of the group. One of those was Jesse Sharps who penned the killer modal jazz number 'Peyote Song III' off 'The Call' and the blues infused 'Clarrise' off *Flight 17*.

In the following year came perhaps the greatest of the Arkestra albums recorded for Nimbus and one of the heaviest live albums in all of jazz. In the mid–1970s, the Arkestra had played every last Sunday at the Immanuel United Church of Christ, on the corner of 85th and Holmes. The invite had come from Reverend **Edgar Edwards**, who viewed the Arkestra as an integral part of the church minister's community outreach program. Recorded between February and June 1979, *Live at I.U.C.C* captures the freedom and fire of those sessions with breath–taking numbers like saxophonist **Sabir Mateen**'s killer spiritual jazz track "Village Dance" and Jesse Sharps' soaring Arkestra classic "Desert Fairy Princess".

The responsibility Horace gave members in both playing and composing led to Ark members branching out to record their own albums on Nimbus. "Horace was as much a musical mentor as one can be when one leads by love and example," says bassist Roberto Miranda. "By that I mean he let you know he loved and respected you and he played at a very high artistic standard. He led and inspired in the same way. However, if one did not meet the artistic standard he set in his example, he did not discourage them. He smiled that great smile of his and somehow let you know he believed that if you worked hard you could do it." Tapscott's music had always reached beyond the African American jazz heritage to Latin, Caribbean, and African music, and that was reflected in Nimbus releases of the period such as Miranda's mighty Afro–Latin LPs *Raphael* from 1981.

The rhythmic pulse of serious percussion players like Lagos–raised **Najite Agindotan** and **Conga Mike** was an important component of the Arkestra's sound. Los Angeles had a long heritage of community

percussion playing stretching back to late 1960s when the drumming circles started in Venice Beach. Conga Mike, a veteran of the scene whose playing can be heard on the Nimbus West LP *Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra Live At Century City Playhouse 9/9/79*, recalls what it was like to be creating the rhythmic foundations for the group: "It was a new experience for me, playing with all those horns. I dug it. Horace hardly ever gave me any specific direction except for to keep playing. A lot of the tunes lent themselves to traditional conga rhythms, though some didn't. Playing those tunes with more than one time signature, and those odd time signatures, like 11/8, 7/8 and 5/4, was new to me. I figured out some cadences to play, and kept counting."

In the 1980s Nimbus released some of the most vital, if until recently underappreciated, jazz of the era. This included Jesse Sharps' *Sharps and Flats* recorded with his quintet in 1985, with piano duties split between Horace and Nate Morgan. Other killer Nimbus releases included the soaring spiritual jazz of Morgan's *Journey Into Nigritia* and *Retribution, Reparation*, and Linda Hill's *Lullaby for Linda*, recorded in 1981 with flautist and vocalist **Adele Sebastian**, **Sabir Matteen**, Roberto Miranda and Everett Brown Jr, all of whom would go on to record LPs for Nimbus. Another serious session was the 1983 LP *Hassan's Walk* by flautist **Dadisi Komolafe**. Until he started to rehearse with the Arkestra in 1974, Komolafe lived a troubled life, in and out of foster homes and prison. He was one of the many whose lives were transformed by Horace. "I was on fire, I played, meditated, drank herbal teas, listened to music very intensely," he told Steve Isoardi.

During the 1980s, a number of members passed on, including Adele Sebastian whose 1981 LP *Desert Fairy Princess* is one of the great spiritual jazz LPs on Nimbus. The decade was a transitional time for Horace, both personally and musically. Following a near-death aneurysm, he returned with the *The Tapscott Sessions* solo piano albums for Nimbus that sit alongside solo releases by piano legends such as Randy Weston and **Abdullah Ibrahim**.

Dwight Trible recalls catching one of these solo sessions. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing and hearing," he says. "It was so intense, by the time he finished, I was exhausted. I had never seen anybody give that much of themselves." Trible first witnessed the power of Horace and the Arkestra in the late 1980s. "It made me change my whole concept of everything I had learned about music," he says. "It shattered me and at first I resisted it, but then I realised I'm being enlightened here."

By the end of the 1980s, soaring unemployment and crime rates coupled with a crack cocaine epidemic and ongoing gang wars were tearing South Central apart. According to the authors of *Whiteout: the CIA, Drugs, and the Press*, by 1990 more than 50,000 people, mostly non-white males, had been arrested in raids, but it would take the televised beating of **Rodney King** to reveal the truth about what had been happening for years. "Being here in the community, you saw it from the ground up and you saw where it was going," Tapscott told **Michael Slate**. "Eventually it boiled over. And I thought the same as I did in the Watts Rebellion. The reasons why it happened still haven't been addressed correctly."

In the immediate aftermath of the resulting uprising in 1992, a creative haven took root around the Black arts enclave of Leimert Park, as young and old came together. The foundations were built by some key venues. **Ben Caldwell**'s Kaos Network had been operating as a community arts centre for young people since the mid 1980s. It was followed in 1989 by The World Stage live music venue opened by Kamau Daáood and jazz drummer Billy Higgins and in 1990 by 5th Street Dicks, the coffee house and live music hub belonging to ex-homeless Vietnam veteran **Richard Fulton**.

Having joined the Arkestra in the late 1980s after Tapscott had seen him perform at The World Stage, Dwight Trible witnessed the transformation of Leimert Park. "Apart from those venues it was kind of like a ghost town – then after the uprisings it really started popping almost overnight," he says. "It became so beautiful and something magical was happening. I would just go down to Leimert Park and stand on the corner and just breathe in the air. It created a community with brother- and sister-hood. The vibration was incredible. It was life affirming."

With all the craziness on the streets it was only natural for the jazz and hip hop generations to come together. "In '92 you had veterans of the previous time in the midst of young folks experiencing that kind of situation for the first time in their lives. With everything happening around Leimert Park, with The World Stage and Fifth Street Dicks, you had this creative form from the exchange of ideas," says Kamau Daáood. "It was the same thing really, the poets and the hip-hop guys, because they were both spokesmen for what was happening at the time. Not only spokesmen, but also reporters of what was going on, looking at the environment around them. Soaking it up and spitting it back out again."

Helping make the links was Horace's son-in-law **Darryll JMD Moore**, drummer, engineer and producer of **Freestyle Fellowship**'s *Inner City Griots*. "The natural connection came through jazz musicians around my way like JMD. He was one of the producers who put together the jazz and hip-hop," says **Aceyalone**, Freestyle Fellowship's co-lyricist. The epicentre for these collaborations was the *Project Blowed* sessions on Thursday nights at KAOS Network where founders Aceyalone, **Mikah 9**, **Abstract Rude** and others who had been part of the scene around The Good Life Café coalesced. "We would take our sessions over to Leimert Park and start jamming with the live bands, so there was a whole load of going back and forth," Aceyalone recalls.

The *Project Blowed* sessions were documented in a 1996 compilation on Grand Royal records that included "Hot", one of the numbers Horace and Freestyle Fellowship collaborated on. "I've had the chance to stretch out with these cats, playing and talking with them," Horace recalled in *Songs of the Unsung*. "I started telling these young rappers that their music has been happening for years. They got real interested... Know that nothing in the music is just beginning. It's all come from the black community and has been for years."

Throughout the 1990s, the Arkestra continued to evolve with new members joining veterans who


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themselves had once been young recruits. Jesse Sharps continued to lead the Arkestra, which now included JMD on drums, and members who still perform with the Arkestra today like **Vinny Golia** on reeds, **William Roper** on tuba and the great trombonist **Phil Ranelin** of Tribe Records fame.

The era also saw the relaunch of **The Great Voice of UGMAA** choir now led by Dwight Trible who had joined the Arkestra in the late 1980s. "The funny thing about Horace's music is that I never found it difficult to learn, which is kind of surprising," he says. "When we first started to work together he would go over the music with me two or three times a week. I don't know if he was trying to make me comfortable, but he kind of seemed as nervous as I was about it. He hadn't worked with vocalists for a long time. But I think he acted that way to put me more at ease to go about trying to learn this in my own way, rather than telling me how to do things."

As a mentor to Dwight, Horace taught him how to pass on his own knowledge to those he would lead as Vocal Director of the Arkestra. "Horace didn't get his point across by saying 'right do this' and 'do that' or 'do it like me'. He was interested in you bringing out who you were and being more open to what your spirit was saying. And I just thought that was magnificent," says Trible. "With Horace it was never about giving anyone any rules about how you should do things but getting people to trust their inner spirit. And that is what I try to do if I am teaching or directing."

As well as touring Europe, the 1990s saw two albums on New York's Arabesque label *Aiee! The Phantom* and *Thoughts Of Dar Es Salaam* recorded while Horace began on a musical with the working title of *Impressions of the Ghetto*. After his happy experiences with Freestyle Fellowship, Horace also appeared on the LP *When the '90s Came* by the legendary rap pioneers **Watts Prophets**.

In the early months of 1998 Horace had continued to perform, despite suffering from what was first diagnosed as palsy. This included a show at the LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) with The Pan-Afrikan Peoples Arkestra And The Great Voice Of UGMAA. Thankfully, the performance was recorded and released by Dark Tree records in 2019. It's a fascinating document of the power of the Ark and its choir in the last months of Horace's life.

In October 1998, Horace suffered a seizure and was rushed into hospital. When examined he was found to have lung cancer that had tragically spread into tumours in his brain. Given a few months to live, Horace met with members to talk about how the Arkestra would continue once he had passed. "Before Horace left he told me some things that I had to do: Keep the music right, write some music, make sure the music stays on," French horn player **Fundi Legohn** told Steve Isoardi.

In his last months, plans were made for an event on February 28th 1999 in honour of Horace at Washington Preparatory High School. Organised by Dwight Trible, the tribute would bring together the biggest ever gathering of the Arkestra to perform for Horace. On Saturday, February 27th, just before midnight Horace Tapscott passed away. "The night before the planned event I was going through my checklist and my last thing at around 1 am was the piano tuner had to come," recalls Trible. "I ticked that off and said 'everything is done'. I went to bed and slept well. Then in the morning I was on the way to sort out the limousine that was going to pick up Horace and the family. And just as I got out of the door I got the call that Horace had passed. I really believe that when I said at 1 am 'everything is done' Horace knew he could get on out of here."

More than a 1,000 people came together at Washington Prep to witness the Arkestra perform under a banner that read "Horace Tapscott/A Man of the People". Over 50 musicians from across the 40 years of the Arkestra led by Michael Session performed on a day that mixed sadness with joy for what Horace had given everyone. "It was the most beautiful tribute I have ever seen," says Trible.

When Horace passed, the mantle was handed down to Michael Session who continued to steer the Ark through the 2000s. One of its new members was his son, drummer **Mekala Session**. As the son of one of the Arkestra's longest serving members he has the music of Horace and the Arkestra running through his blood. "I remember vividly my father taking me to Ark rehearsals when I was just a little kid and I would just play along with them so I learned about their songs well before I became a member," he says. "I have memories of running around the rehearsals at around two or three years old and everyone in the Ark always looked after me, so I grew up with them being my family. And although Horace passed away when I was four years old my parents say they used to take me over to his house when I was a baby and we were like best friends. We would play piano together."

Having played drums since he was "three years old", Mekala joined the Arkestra one day, at the age of 13, when they were rehearsing at his house: "My father got a call from the drummer to say he couldn't make it so my uncle **Steve Smith**, trumpeter with the Ark said 'Why don't we just get Mekala to play with us'. I already knew lots of the songs because I'd grown up with them. I didn't read music, it was just listening and memorising parts. So I did the rehearsal and everyone was like 'Yeah, it sounds like he's in the Ark now'."

Mekala was soon playing concerts with the Arkestra, learning more of Horace's methods as a bandleader that had been passed down. "Horace would never have music stands at shows and he expected members to memorise all the parts after practising them at home," he says. "Also you might have rehearsed certain songs, but then at the actual show Horace would call out any other songs. Then he would point to members for a solo so you had to be ready for anything. I think this gives you a better connection to the music."

As part of his graduation while studying at CalArts (California Institute of the Arts), Mekala put on a show by the Ark, which at the time was only playing around three concerts a year. "The gig went really well and one of my friends, **Jesse Justice**, found this place called Zebulon near where he lived and said we could get a show there. We put that show on and everyone got paid. I was bringing in my friends and a bunch of new talent. So that was the start of it really."

Taking over as musical director in 2018 Mekala

has steered the Ark into new waters, bringing in new members, such as pianist **Jamael Dean** and saxophonists **Aaron Shaw** and **Randal Fisher**, to join his father and other elders like long standing members Jesse Sharps, Kamau Daáood, Phil Ranelin, Roberta Miranda and vocal director Dwight Trible. "I always try to keep a good balance, with an equal amount of legacy members and new members," says Mekala. "Then there are some cats who might not have played with the Ark for a long time, so calling them up is just as cool as seeing some young players performing with the Ark for the first time. The Ark has always been about representing the whole community – from veterans who had been doing this their whole life to young people just coming up, including my friends and people I met at college. And I think for those people playing in the Ark really does redefine their identity and how they think about and play music."

For Dwight Trible, Mekala's energy and that of the young members he has brought in has reinvigorated the Ark. "Everything had become somewhat dormant and Mekala has taken the Ark to a new place," he says. "Horace never had the people around him who knew about the business and all of that. But Mekala and his buddies know how to get around and do things."

Central to the Arkestra is the preservation of the music created by members over the last 60 years. "We are doing songs that I might not have played before and others I have never heard before," says Mekala. "Songs that there are no recordings of that we have found a chart for. So it's a case of us not reimagining songs, but doing them for the first time for over 40 years. And that is crazy."

This latest incarnation of the Arkestra and its associated splinter projects is now being released on a new label, The Village, set up by Mekala and Jesse Justice. "The label began when I found my dad's cassette stash. It was old recordings of him playing with Horace, and other Arkestra members playing live and rehearsing. I would give tapes to Jesse to see if he could make beats out of them," says Mekala. "But Jesse was like 'This stuff is crazy'. And a few of the tapes were really good quality. So we started to pitch these recordings to other labels, with no luck. So we decided to release the stuff ourselves."

In 2020, The Village debuted with a duo recording of Horace and Michael Session live in Avignon, France in 1989, followed by a recording by Arkestra splinter group **The Gathering**. This collective debuted on October 10th 2005 when Jesse Sharps brought together Arkestra elders including Kamau Daáood, **Azar Lawrence**, Phil Ranelin, Roberto Miranda, and Michael Session with up and coming players like **Miguel Atwood-Ferguson** and a young **Kamasi Washington** for a performance at CalArts in Valencia, CA. The Gathering revived the name of a community centre and performance space founded by **Dadisi Sanyika** that Daáood helped organise as a platform for Arkestra members back in the 1970s. On the 15th anniversary of the performance, the album *The Gathering: Roots & Branches of Los Angeles Jazz* became the second LP on The Village.

In celebration of the 2005 summit, Sharps brought The Gathering back in 2015 with a smaller ensemble of elders and young players for a performance at Mayme Clayton Library and Museum in Culver City. Extracts from the programme were released under the name *Healing Suite* (the name of a poem by Kamau Daáood performed at the concert) by The Village in January 2022.

Since its inception, The Village has supported new young talent to emerge from the Arkestra. Artists like pianist **Jamael Dean**, grandson of early Arkestra drummer **Donald Dean**, who performs with the Arkestra alongside regular collaborators like Carlos Niño. "Jamael is very, very proficient at reading and arranging music which is great for the Ark," says Mekala. "He's amazing and I know the Ark means as much to him as it does to me. We both want to see it thrive and reach new ground."

Like Nimbus before it, The Village has become an important platform for Arkestra members to release their own music. "The original idea was just to release archive material but then we thought we should release new material, too, because so many people in the Ark have their own projects – it's like a band of bandleaders," says Mekala. One was Jamael Dean, who released his sublime solo piano LP *Ished Tree* on The Village in November 2020, followed at the end of last year by Ark tenor saxophonist **Randal Fisher**'s *Everywhere Will Be Lost*.

With a raft of new projects on the way, including a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Arkestra, the next chapter is only just beginning. "It's amazing what Mekala is doing, bringing in these new guys and working on their own compositions and all of that," says Dwight Trible. "I believe he is going to take the Ark to a whole new level."

It's sixty years since Horace founded the Arkestra and as this new chapter unfolds, his legacy is proving to be both deep and profound: "When people look back at the history of jazz, Horace will be in the pantheon of the greats as both a musician and composer," concludes Elaine Brown. "He was a genius, in being able to get all those great people together in the Arkestra and to inspire them. As a man, he was inspirational to a whole lot of people, including me. He was a facilitator who helped people find their way. Anyone who met Horace Tapscott has to say that they could do some stuff that would be good and meaningful to humanity. There was no way you could be around Horace and not be transformed into a better person."

**thevillagela.bandcamp.com**


Horace Tapscott
THE CALL


The Giant is Awakened
Horace Tapscott Quintet